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# SEXUALLY ABUSED CHILDREN IN A NATIONAL SURVEY OF PARENTS: METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES

DAVID FINKELHOR

Family Research Laboratory, University of New Hampshire, Durham, NH, USA

DAVID MOORE

The Gallup Organization, Princeton, NJ, USA

SHERRY L. HAMBY AND MURRAY A. STRAUS

Family Research Laboratory, University of New Hampshire, Durham, NH, USA

**Abstract**—In a national survey of 1,000 parents, which primarily concerned disciplinary practices and violence toward their children, two questions were asked about whether the children had been sexually abused. This was to assess the feasibility of epidemiological research on contemporaneous sexual abuse using parental interviews rather than the usual adult retrospective approach. From these questions, rates of sexual abuse for children currently 0–17 were estimated at 1.9% in the last year and 5.7% ever. The cases making up these rates included a nearly equal number of boys and girls and no female victims between the ages of 9 and 12, a distribution different from those generally obtained by other epidemiological methods, but due possibly in this case to normal sampling variation. Cases were more likely to be disclosed for children whose parents had themselves been sexually abused, who were from lower income households, or who were living with only one biologic parent. Although some of the findings suggest caution in generalizing about child sexual abuse from survey samples of parents, the method is worthy of exploration if only to gain better epidemiologic data about parent knowledge, reaction, reporting, and coping strategies. Copyright © 1996 Elsevier Science Ltd

**Key Words**—Sexual abuse, Survey, Parent.

## INTRODUCTION

EPIDEMIOLOGIC STUDIES HAVE taken very different approaches to studying sexual compared to physical abuse in childhood. In the case of sexual abuse, the vast majority of studies have uncovered cases by asking adults *retrospectively* about their childhood experiences (for a review and listing, see Finkelhor, 1994). By contrast, many studies of physical abuse simply ask parents directly about *contemporaneous* acts of violence that they or other adults may have committed against their children (usually in the last year), something never done in regard to sexual abuse (for a review and listing, see Yodanis & Straus, 1995). The big advantage of the contemporaneous approach is that it gathers current information, less subject

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Reprint requests should be addressed to David Finkelhor, Ph.D., Family Research Laboratory, University of New Hampshire, 126 Horton Social Science Center, Durham, NH 03824.

to the distortions of time and memory. An additional advantage is that other information about context and risk factors, being more immediate, may be more accurate as well.

While this approach has by its success gained credibility in the study of physical abuse, two presumptions have limited its application in the case of sexual abuse. First, it has been believed that parents would either not know about a child's sexual abuse or be too ashamed to disclose such a serious norm violation by themselves or some other close relative. Second, it has been assumed that the incidence rate would be so small for a single year (or some other recent period) that extremely large samples would have to be used to assemble a reasonable number of cases or construct reliable incidence estimates.

More than a decade ago, such an approach to studying sexual abuse was piloted in preparatory work for the first National Incidence Study (NIS) of Child Abuse and Neglect (National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect [NCCAN], 1981), but the results suggested that the method was not workable in that very few cases of sexual abuse were disclosed. However, it may be that changing norms and social awareness have made such an approach more feasible than was once thought. More public discussion of sexual abuse, more prevention programs targeted at children, and greater public acceptance of the problem may all mean that when children are sexually abused, parents today are more likely to be told or to find out about it and may be more comfortable disclosing such information to researchers.

To test the feasibility of such an approach, we included some direct questions about contemporaneous sexual abuse in a national survey of parents about child abuse. This paper reports on the results.

## METHODOLOGY

### *Design*

The questions on sexual abuse were included in a national telephone survey on the topic of child discipline and child abuse conducted by the Gallup Organization in August and September, 1995 (Moore, Gallup, & Schussel, 1995). Random digit dialing was used to contact and screen for households with children under the age of 18. One thousand such households were identified from a screening of 2,250 adults. Respondents were asked to participate in a survey of "people's opinions about how to raise children." Sexual abuse was not mentioned as a specific topic. The refusal rate among eligible adults was 19%, and the overall response rate was 52%, which takes into account numbers that were busy or never answered. (More than 90% of the unresolved numbers were called six times.) In two-parent households, one parent was randomly selected for the interview. This resulted in 65% of the respondents being mothers or mother substitutes, 32% fathers or father substitutes, and 2% adults in other caretaker relationships to the child. The respondent gender imbalance was due to the excess of single-parent households headed by women. All survey questions pertained to one particular child, who in multi-child households was also chosen at random.

The data on the children asked about in the survey matched fairly closely U.S. Census information on children under 18 for characteristics such as race, age, and region. There was, however, an overrepresentation of households with parents holding a college education (34% vs. 23% in the Census) and an underrepresentation of those with less than a high school education (8% vs. 14% in the Census). In all analyses, data were weighted to reflect the latest U.S. Census statistics with regard to children's age, gender, race, region of the country, and parent's education. This involved an assumption that the replies of nonsurveyed members of underrepresented groups would be similar to those who were surveyed.

## Measures

In this survey, focused largely on parent-child relations, four questions at the very end asked about sexual abuse. They included a preamble, two questions about the respondent's own sexual abuse experiences and two about the respondent's child:

Now I would like to ask you something about your own experiences as a child that may be very sensitive. As you know, sometimes, in spite of efforts to protect them, children get sexually abused, molested, or touched in sexual ways that are wrong. To find out more about how often they occur, we would like to ask you about your own experiences when you were a child.

28. Before the age of 18, were you personally ever touched in a sexual way by an adult or older child when you did not want to be touched that way, or were you ever forced to touch an adult or older child in a sexual way—including anyone who was a member of your family, or anyone outside your family?
29. Before the age of 18, were you ever forced to have sex by an adult or older child—including anyone who was a member of your family, or anyone outside your family?
30. What about the experience of your own child. As far as you know, IN THE PAST YEAR, has your child been touched in a sexual way by an adult or older child when your child did not want to be touched that way, or has (he/she) been forced to touch an adult or an older child in a sexual way—including anyone who was a member of your family, or anyone outside your family? (If No:) Has it ever happened?
31. In the last year, has your child been forced to have sex by an adult or an older child—including anyone who was a member of your family, or anyone outside your family? (If No:) Has it ever happened?

No additional definition was given of any of the specific terms such as "touched in a sexual way" or "forced to have sex." Other items in the survey inquired about demographic characteristics—family income, family structure, and race—as well as questions about possible acts of physical violence, corporal punishment, and neglect that the parent may have perpetrated toward the child (for wording see Moore et al., 1995).

## FINDINGS

Eighteen respondents (1.9%) revealed that their child had been sexually abused in the last year (95% confidence interval 1.0–2.7%) and 57 (5.7%) said that this had happened at some time in the child's life (95% confidence interval 4.3–7.2%) (Table 1). This included 1.7% who answered yes, in the last year, and 5.3% yes, ever, to the question about sexual touch, and .5% who answered yes, in the last year, and 1.4% yes, ever, to the question on forced sex (these add to more than the total because some parents answered yes to both questions).

Broken down by gender, the respondents identified 11 sexually abused boys (2.0% of all boys) and 7 girls (1.7% of girls) abused in the last year, and 32 ever abused boys (6.1%) and 25 ever abused girls (5.3%).

There were significant differences in rates by age. The abuse in the last year tended to cluster in two age groups (Table 2). There was a cluster of 5- to 8-year-olds who were abused, two-thirds of whom were boys, and there was a cluster of 13- to 17-year-olds, two-thirds of whom were girls. There were no girls 9 to 12 years of age and only one boy of this age reported as abused.

A sexually abused child was somewhat more likely to be revealed by a respondent in a family lacking one of the child's biological parents or with an income under \$30,000 (Table 1).

The characteristic most closely associated with reporting a sexually abused child was the respondents having been sexually abused themselves. Overall 23% of the respondents disclosed a personal history of sexual abuse, 30% of the women and 9% of the men. (The percentages for the question about sexual touch was 22% of women and 8% of the men and for the question on forced sex 12% of the women and 5% of the men, with some reporting both.) The rate of sexual abuse for the child of a sexually abused respondent was 6.0% for abuse in the last

**Table 1. Sexual Abuse of Child Reported by Parent Caretaker: Last Year and Ever**

	<i>N</i>	Last Year		Ever	
		%	RR <sup>a</sup>	%	RR <sup>a</sup>
All Children	(998)	1.9	—	5.7	—
Gender of Child					
Boys	(509)	2.0	1.1	6.1	1.1
Girls	(489)	1.7	0.9	5.3	0.9
Gender of Respondent					
Male	(336)	0.9	0.4	5.5	0.9
Female	(664)	2.3	2.5	5.8	1.1
Child Age					
0 thru 4	(284)	0.5	0.2*	—	—
5 thru 8	(234)	2.9	1.9	—	—
9 thru 12	(233)	0.4	0.2	—	—
13 thru 17	(249)	3.8	3.2**	—	—
Family Structure					
Two Biological Parents	(522)	0.9	0.3*	4.2	0.5*
Other	(478)	2.9	3.1*	7.4	1.8*
Parent Educational Level					
High school or less	(454)	2.0	1.1	5.5	0.9
Some college	(320)	2.1	1.2	6.4	1.2
College graduate	(225)	1.3	0.7	5.4	0.9
Race					
White	(820)	1.7	0.6	5.5	0.7
African American	(125)	2.8	1.6	8.0	1.5
Hispanic Minority	(14)	0	—	4.5	0.8
Other	(30)	4.0	2.2	5.4	0.9
Income					
<\$30k	(406)	3.2	4.9**	6.7	1.4
\$30k–\$50k	(275)	0.8	0.4	5.0	0.9
>\$50k	(287)	0.5	0.2	4.5	0.7
Religion					
Protestant	(600)	1.9	1.0	5.7	1.0
Catholic	(231)	1.3	0.6	5.0	0.8
Region					
Northeast	(473)	1.0	0.5*	3.3	0.5
Midwest	(309)	3.1	2.1	6.7	1.3
South	(59)	2.5	1.6	6.6	1.3
West	(159)	0.3	0.1*	5.2	0.9
Respondent was Sexually Abused as a Child	(230)	6.0	10.2****	11.1	2.9****
Parent Used Corporal Punishment This Year	(611)	1.8	0.9	6.1	1.2
Parent Neglected Child, This Year	(268)	2.8	2.1	9.1	2.3**
Parent Physically Abused Child, This Year	(49)	0	—	7.2	1.3
Parent Left Child Home Alone, Ever	(212)	3.8	3.4**	10.6	2.7***
Parent Not Able to Get Child Food, Ever	(136)	4.2	2.9*	10.5	2.3**
Too Drunk or High to Care for Child, Ever	(33)	6.7	4.2*	11.2	2.2

<sup>a</sup> Relative Risk.

\*  $p \leq .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$ ; \*\*\*\*  $p < .0001$ .

**Table 2. Sexual Abuse Cases in Last Year: Distribution by Gender and Age**

	0–2	3 + 4	5 + 6	7 + 8	9 + 10	11 + 12	13 + 14	15–17
Boys 54%	13%	—	13%	34%	—	10%	15%	14%
( <i>n</i> = 10)	(1)	—	(1)	(3)	—	(1)	(2)	(1)
Girls 46%	—	—	—	24%	—	—	62%	14%
( <i>n</i> = 8)	—	—	—	(2)	—	—	(5)	(1)
	7%	—	7%	30%	—	5%	37%	14%

year—over 10 times higher than for other respondents. The rate for sexual abuse at any time was 11.1% for the abused respondents—almost three times as much as the rest.

Children were also more likely to be reported sexually abused among respondents who said they had engaged in neglectful behaviors in the last year. If the parent had left the child home alone, had not been able to get him/her the food he/she needed, or had been too drunk or high to care for the child, the parent was also more likely to say the child had been sexually abused.

Because some of these risk factors were interrelated, a logistic regression was run to identify independent predictors of having a child who had been sexually abused. For a child abused in the last year, the three predictors were the respondent being a sexual abuse victim, having a family income of less than \$30,000, and the child being a teenager (Table 3). For a child ever having been sexually abused, the significant predictors, in addition to the respondent being a sexual abuse victim, were not having both biological parents living in the household, and the respondent admitting to having left the child home alone without adequate supervision.

## DISCUSSION

The fact that 18 parents revealed that a child had been sexually abused in the last year suggests the possible utility of asking parents about sexual abuse contemporaneously in survey studies. Eighteen is a relatively small but not negligible number in a survey of this size. For somewhat larger surveys of 2,500 to 3,000 families, which are not uncommon in modern survey studies of families and parenting, this would mean the identification of possibly 50 families with known sexually abused children, samples that would be large enough to do important studies concerning the impact or etiology of sexual abuse.

Of course, one must keep in mind the confidence interval for this study. Based on this survey size of 1,000, the number of cases which could have been uncovered ranges from 10 to 27 in the 95% confidence interval. This would mean that to be relatively certain of identifying 50 sexually abused children, one would need a sample of about 5,000. This is still within the domain of many epidemiological studies.

However, the findings from the survey also contain certain anomalies that suggest caution about the utility of this approach for studying sexual abuse. The outstanding anomaly is the

**Table 3. Risk Factors for Sexual Abuse to Child**

Factor	% Sexual Abuse	Relative Risk	Adjusted Odds <sup>a</sup>
A. In Last Year			
Parent SA Victim	6%	10.2***	10.6***
Income <\$30K	3%	4.9**	3.6*
Teenage Child	3%	2.7*	3.0*
Family without two Biological Parents	3%	3.1*	1.7
Left Child Home Alone	4%	3.4*	2.0
B. Ever			
Parent SA Victim	11%	2.9***	2.3**
Left Child Home Alone	11%	2.7***	2.1**
Family without two Biological Parents	7%	1.8*	1.8*

<sup>a</sup> Adjusted in a logistic regression analysis that included the other variables indicated in each panel.

\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

fact that in this survey the number of boy victims slightly, although not significantly, exceeded the number of girl victims. This runs contrary to nearly every epidemiologic survey on sexual abuse, including those based on cases known to professionals (Sedlak & Broadhurst, 1996) and those based on self-reports of adult or adolescent respondents (Finkelhor, 1994; Finkelhor & Baron, 1986), which find girls predominate at a ratio of from 2:1 to 4:1. Indeed, the gender ratio for self-reported sexual abuse among the adult respondents in this survey is nearly three women for every man, very consistent with the rest of the literature. Moreover, the absolute self-report rates of 30% for women and 9% for men are quite similar to those found in other national telephone surveys using different sexual abuse questions (Finkelhor, 1994). This suggests that the questions in this study were effective, at least, they are asking about the same universe of experiences that has been tapped in other self-report studies. Thus the gender equivalence for the contemporaneous abuse reported by parents about their children is quite surprising.

One plausible explanation of the gender anomaly is simply the problem of random sampling variation. According to the 95% confidence interval based on this sample, the true rate for boys could be as low as .8% and the true rate for girls as high as 2.9%, a ratio much more comparable to other studies and even the self-reported rate for the adults in this one.

Another possible explanation of the unexpected gender ratio is a bias in parental knowledge or reporting. For example, other studies suggest that girls are more likely than boys to be abused by someone inside the family (Finkelhor, 1994). If intrafamily abuse is the kind that parents are least likely to know about or least likely to feel comfortable disclosing to interviewers, then the gender equivalence in the current findings could result from the nondisclosure of these kinds of cases, predominantly girls (that would be disclosed in surveys based on retrospective self reports). Unfortunately, this possibility cannot be directly examined here.

The age distribution of cases in this survey is also somewhat different from those based on other data sources. There is a dearth of cases for children, especially girls, between ages 9 and 12. In retrospective surveys and among agency reports, this is an age during which a great deal of abuse is reported (Finkelhor & Baron, 1986). Once again, given the small number of cases, this could easily be a random sampling variation. However, it is also a sign of caution about whether this methodology is identifying a representative sample of sexual abuse cases.

In trying to evaluate the methodology, the findings in this study about other correlates of and risk factors for sexual abuse are generally supportive of the validity of the methodology. The literature on sexual abuse does suggest that children are more at risk in families in which the parents were sexually abused, and where the quality of parenting may have been compromised because of the absence of a biological parent or due to neglect (Finkelhor & Baron, 1986). The findings in this survey of higher rates among children of parents who were sexually abused, have been neglectful and where a biological parent is absent from the home are quite consistent with this previous literature.

As an aside, the issue about why sexually abused parents would disclose more sexual abuse among their children is an interesting one with several possible explanations, not all of which imply some parental inadequacy. Being a victim of sexual abuse could compromise parents' ability to supervise or care for children in a way that makes them more vulnerable. Or sexual abuse may be more common in some subcultures and if parents tend to raise their children in the environments they were raised, the children may be at increased risk. But it may also be that parents who were sexually abused are more sensitive to cues or more open with their children in ways that allow them to *find out* about more abuse. They might also, as a result of their own experiences, have a somewhat more encompassing definition of "unwanted sexual touch" or "forced sex," the two key concepts asked about in the questions about abuse. Alternatively, it could be simply that parents willing to confide their own abuse to a survey interviewer are more likely to be willing to confide information on their child's abuse. This

is an example of some of the substantive issues that can be pursued with a parent survey methodology of this type.

One other finding from this survey diverges somewhat from other studies on sexual abuse: the finding on higher rates among lower SES families (Finkelhor & Baron, 1986). Few of the retrospective studies find this association, but then most of these are not able to clearly measure the socioeconomic status of victims at the time of abuse, so the findings from this survey could well be more accurate. However, if the cases from this survey underrepresent *intrafamily* abuse as suggested earlier, it could be that the addition of these cases would nullify the SES bias.

Another yardstick for evaluating the results of these questions is the estimated rate of children who, according to parents, were "ever abused," 5.7%. This is very much lower than the estimate of 23% "ever abused" for the parents themselves, a figure consistent with the general finding from the better retrospective surveys (Finkelhor, 1994). However, it must be remembered that, for most of the children in this study, "ever abused" does not yet include all of their childhood and particularly the extra high-risk teenage years. By the time all the children in this sample finish childhood, one would expect the rate to more than double. Still the distance from 23% suggests the degree to which parents may not know about or disclose what is actually happening to their children.

Another fact that makes the 5.7% "ever abused" seem low is that it is just three times larger than the annual rate of 1.9%. An annual rate of almost 2% might be expected to create a much larger pool of victims over time. It is possible that many of the children sexually abused in 1 year were also previous victims. But it is also possible that the 1.9% figure is inflated by some abuse that actually happened more than a year earlier being reported as happening within the last year (a common process referred to in the victimization literature as "telescoping"). Moreover, the 5.7% ever figure may be low because parents are not remembering abuse that happened more than a few years ago.

Even if the annual incidence rate with this methodology were somewhat inflated, it still suggests that there are a large number of abused children who are not being identified by other systems of data collection. The current findings, extrapolated to the youth population of the U.S., implies that over 1.2 million children are known to their parents to have been sexually abused every year. Even the low end of the 95% confidence interval for this estimate would be more than 600,000 sexually abused children, which stands in contrast to incidence figures from the NIS study based on cases known to professionals or agencies that suggest only somewhat over 300,000 sexually abused children come to professional attention each year (Sedlak & Broadhurst, 1996). However, this contrast is exceedingly crude because estimates coming from studies like the NIS use a definition of sexual abuse that would tend to exclude some of the kinds of cases likely to be identified by parents (e.g., cases of molestation by a complete stranger).

Thus, this experiment with surveying about contemporaneous abuse poses many questions. Unfortunately, a shortcoming of the current study is that very little information was obtained about the nature and circumstances or the actual time of occurrence of the abuse. With that information, it might be much easier to understand disparities with previous findings, reconcile some of the estimates, and to make an assessment of whether this approach provides a promising research strategy for studying sexual abuse. Any future experiments with parent surveys should certainly gather such details. For example, if the parent indicates that their child has been abused, information should be gathered on the identity of the perpetrator, the kinds of sexual touching or forced sex involved, and to whom the abuse was reported. Questions need to locate the occurrence of the abuse by month or day, and a clear distinction made between when it occurred and when the parent found out about it. In addition, in the initial screening for episodes, techniques should be used for creating clear time boundaries (e.g., referring to the

last year as the period between now “and last Thanksgiving” or other memorable occasions) in order to insure that events are not telescoped into the last year when they actually occurred at a prior time.

## CONCLUSION

To expand epidemiologic knowledge about sexual abuse, researchers should explore the use of community surveys of parents to supplement surveys that are currently conducted with professionals and of adult self-reports. This study suggests that adequately sized samples of sexually abused children may be identified through such survey approaches, and that such samples may be used to study risk factors and effects. There may be biases to such samples, for example, parents may underreport intrafamily sexual abuse and they may not know about all of the abuse that has occurred to their children. But there are serious limitations to other epidemiological sources as well. Surveys based on professionals or agencies obviously are missing a large amount of abuse, which never gets disclosed to professionals. Surveys based on retrospective adult accounts may have substantial memory distortions (Williams, 1994). Because it is useful to try to have information about a hidden problem from as many methodological vantage points as possible, parent surveys are worth developing. And there are some issues, for example, concerning parent knowledge about sexual abuse as well as information about their reactions, their reporting, and their coping strategies when they find out about sexual abuse of their children that are probably best explored through parent interviews such as these. For that reason alone, the strategy of surveying parents about known cases of sexual abuse deserves further research attention.

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**Résumé**—Dans le cadre d'une étude nationale de 1.000 parents portant principalement sur la violence et les moyens de discipliner les enfants, on a demandé deux questions pour savoir si leurs enfants avaient été agressés sexuellement. Le but était d'évaluer la faisabilité de mener des recherches épidémiologiques sur des abus sexuels actuels en ayant recours à des entrevues avec les parents plutôt qu'à des enquêtes rétrospectives. À partir de ces questions, on a établi un taux d'abus sexuels de 1,9 pour cent durant la dernière année et de 5,7 pour cent au total, pour des enfants présentement âgés de 0 à 17 ans. Les cas sur lesquels ces statistiques se basent comprennent un nombre à peu près égal de garçons et de filles. Il n'y avait aucune fille agressée dont l'âge se situait entre 9 et 12 ans. Ceci représente une distribution différent de celle qu'on obtient à partir d'autres études épidémiologiques, mais ceci pourrait s'expliquer par des variances normales de l'échantillon. La probabilité que les cas soient dévoilés augmentait si les parents eux-mêmes avaient été agressés sexuellement, si les enfants venaient de foyers à faible revenu ou bien vivaient avec un seul de leurs parents naturels. Bien que certains constats porteraient à user de prudence lorsqu'il s'agit de généraliser à partir d'échantillons de parents, la méthode mérite d'être explorée davantage sinon pour acquérir de meilleures

données épidémiologiques concernant les connaissances des parents, leurs réactions, leurs signalement et leurs stratégies pour faire face aux adversités.

**Resumen—**En una encuesta nacional de 1000 padres, que concernía principalmente las prácticas disciplinarias y la violencia contra los niños, se hicieron dos preguntas sobre si los niños habían sido abusados sexualmente. Esto se hizo para evaluar la factibilidad de una investigación epidemiológica sobre abuso sexual contemporáneo utilizando entrevistas con los padres en vez de el enfoque adulto retrospectivo. De estas preguntas, se estimaron las tasas de abuso sexual para los niños de 0–17 en la actualidad en 1.9% en el último año y 5.7% en total. Los casos que se incluyen en estas tasas tienen casi el mismo número de muchachos que de muchachas y no hay víctimas femeninas entre las edades de 9 a 12 años, una distribución diferente de las que se obtienen generalmente por otros métodos epidemiológicos, pero en este caso, posiblemente debido a variaciones normales de muestreo. Los padres con mayor probabilidad de denunciar el abuso eran los que habían sido ellos mismos abusados, los que venían de hogares con menores ingresos y los que vivían con uno de los padres biológicos. A pesar de que los resultados sugieren precaución para generalizar sobre el abuso sexual a los niños de encuestas con muestras de padres, el método merece explorarse aunque sea solo para adquirir mejores datos epidemiológicos sobre el conocimiento de los padres, sus reacciones y sus estrategias de reporte y respuesta al conflicto.